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Shortgrass Country

by Monte Noelke

An important consideration for taking a September holiday in Nova Scotia instead of going to the warmer places like Mexico or Central America was because of the bad sportsmanship of the Indians in the southern climes over the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America.

Up in the Cape Breton area where I traveled, the English explorer John Cabot found the North American continent in 1497, allowing a safe margin of five years before a big protest could be organized against him.

Tourist literature claims that along with French, Gaelic and English on Cape Breton, the Micmac Indian language was last spoken. Micmacs have a small vocabulary. The name of a township called "Antigonish" meant "A bear breaking branches in a tree to gather beach nuts." Sounds like writing a summary in Micmac would be a snap.

In one Acadian town the menu was in French and the waitress acted like she'd been an exchange student and completed her graduate work in a chili joint in Texas.

At the next table two local ladies whispered the latest news. The husband of one, a gent of excessive girth and

stoic composure, devoted his attention to a large platter of fried smelts and a side dish of steamed crabs and shrimp.

The morning of our boat trip the captain has said the largest ocean creatures live off the smallest things in the sea. Monster sharks and enormous blue whales swim through schools of mackerel and hundreds of swordfish to eat tiny cephalopods and suck nearly invisible plankton into their baleens.

From the way the orange shells and broken claws built up on the old boy's plate, Homo Sapiens must base their appetites on the same standards used by whales and sharks. The smelts looked good piled high, like the Portuguese attack fresh sardines. Hamburgers listed as "Sandwich Chaud a' la Viande Hachee" were classy in name; and at the price of about five bucks in U.S. currency, a ritzy dish just to shut a kid up on a long trip.

Farther down the road a hard rain forced a stopover at a Scotch whiskey distillery that rented rooms for the night. A well-appointed establishment, run by a staff speaking a slightly burred English and much more light hearted than expected.

The Scotch people once had title to all of Nova Scotia. "Title" seems like the right word. The English and French fought so much among themselves, or that's the way the story

sounds, they ran the Scotsmen back home, along with everybody else of a peaceful disposition.

No need to go into the 18th century history of the English kicking out the French farmers, resulting in changing the heritage of the state of Louisiana. Hard feelings exist in Canada to this very day. The big portion of the French blood on the Cape traces to 400 refugees who walked back to Nova Scotia from Boston only to find their lands in British hands. But if you've lived around the Daughter's of Confederacy and such like, the best way to treat issues like that is to wave at all the motorists on the road and give strangers big smiles out on the sidewalks.

In the highest part of the Cape Breton Highland Park, the environment changes to sub-arctic. On a ridge 1300 feet above sea level, a swamp-like bog is passable by wooden walkways. Plants show slight effects of cool weather. Blossoms of the insectivores, however, were still trapping bees in their locking petals. Called pitcher plants; they'd be worth thousands of dollars just to trap heel flies in Texas.

Thick fogs and fierce thunderstorms closed in the drive back to Halifax. A cold front was moving from the north. Just the name Labrador on the weather map made a winter seem imminent.